

Iran, Palestine, and the Arab Spring: The View from Israel

Haleh Esfandiari:

I'm Haleh Esfandiari, the director of the Middle East Program at the Woodson Wilson International Center for Scholars. Welcome to the 24th meeting in the Alma and Joseph Gildenhorn Middle East Forum. We launched this series in 2004. The forum is one of the most popular. As you see, we have an overflow with 90 people upstairs. It's one of the most popular that we host at the Middle East Program, and it has brought to the Wilson Center prominent policy makers, thinkers, and leaders. And I must say, we have had an attendance of over 2,500 people since its inauguration.

Jane Harman, the president and CEO of the Wilson Center will introduce today's speaker, Efraim Halevy, the former director of the Mossad and former head of the Israeli National Security. And Aaron Miller, the Center's vice president for New Initiatives will moderate this session.

Jane Harman resigned from Congress on February 28th, 2011 to join the Woodrow Wilson Center as its first female director, president, and CEO. And you can imagine how thrilled we as women at the Center are. And -- you don't want me to continue with your -- I practiced so --

[laughter]

I need to say one more thing, okay? [laughs]

Jane Harman:

Okay, [unintelligible].

Haleh Esfandiari:

I can't not say. My friends in Los Angeles would kill me if I don't say that you were representing the aerospace center of California during nine terms in Congress, and that you served on all the major security committees: six years on the Armed Services, eight years on the Intelligence, and four on Homeland Security. And Congresswoman Harman has made -- has covered almost the whole world including 10 days ago she returned from Kosovo.

Jane Harman:

Right.

Haleh Esfandiari:

And I will introduce, afterward, Aaron. [laughs]

Jane Harman:

Okay, all right.

Haleh Esfandiari:

You have the floor.

Jane Harman:

Thank you, Haleh. And Haleh is an example, probably our proudest example, of the role women play at the Wilson Center. The Middle East Project is one of our most important projects. And this gift from Chairman Joe Gildenhorn and his wife, Alma, who are right there, makes much of our work possible. And it's not just the gift of dollars, it's the gift of their time, and energy, and insights.

I am thrilled today very briefly to introduce a friend of mine, Efraim Halevy. As you heard, I spent many long years in Congress. In fact, I call myself an escapee from the United States Congress. I am now at a place that is bipartisan, and very serious and focused, that has civil dialogue, and has very little resemblance to my last line of work. But at any rate, while there and while the ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee, I met numerous times with Efraim Halevy when he was the director of the Mossad. It was a very difficult time for Israel and us, and he always provided and still provides wise counsel.

One of the things that people may not know about him is that he was the principal secret negotiator of the Israel-Jordan peace treaty, and it's easy to forget that role but it is important to understand how crucial that peace treaty is now as the region is so volatile. There's a bit of good news, today. I'm told the new Egyptian ambassador to Israel came today to announce that Israel -- that Egypt will abide by the peace treaty with Israel. But we have relied on the peace treaty -- Israel has relied on it and so have we, the peace treaty with Jordan, for many years. And Efraim Halevy deserves enormous credit for that.

As Haleh said, we watch developments in the Middle East very closely here. President Hadi of Yemen came a few weeks ago to speak about a way forward for his country,

which is trying hard to become a strong ally in the fight against terrorism and has huge economic challenges. We just held the second of three meetings on how women are faring in the Arab Awakening. Last month, a former deputy secretary of state and ambassador, Tom Pickering, and other senior national security officials, military officers, and experts with decades of Middle East experience presented a report that they have written: a balanced, nonpartisan, fact-based report on the benefits and costs of military action against Iran, a topic that I know we all are assessing and I am sure that Efraim Halevy has views on. The report estimates that an Israeli airstrike could delay Iran's ability to build a nuclear weapon by up to two years, but that it would not replicate the success of earlier surgical strikes against single reactors in Iraq and Syria, et cetera. But at any rate, it's a topic on everyone's minds.

Let me just say this, as this -- as our endless presidential election draws to a close, it is a pleasure and relief to me to have a very serious thinker about the world, not just a serious thinker but a serious doer, come to share his insights with us, and perhaps to provide even an hour of the ability to not watch a negative ad and to watch a very important presentation. I'm not sure -- are you introducing Aaron, or am I?

Haleh Esfandiari:
Yes.

Jane Harman:
Oh, Haleh's back to introduce Aaron. I will just say that he is an enormously valued colleague at the Wilson Center. His voice on the Middle East and many other topics is heard around the world. Efraim says he's met multiple times, I guess on this visit, with Aaron. I said once is enough, but apparently not. And Aaron really does dazzle us with his insights into the Middle East, and they were on display just a couple days ago in another forum that we held. So, Haleh is coming back, I think to defend my attack on Aaron. Is that -- is that what's next?

Haleh Esfandiari:
To complement.

Jane Harman:
To complement, oh. So, are you coming back? What is

happening? All right, but Efraim, welcome here. Again, it honors us to have you here and I'm very much looking forward to your remarks today.

Haleh Esfandiari:

Thank you very much, Jane. Can I -- I was told by the various cameras in the room that if you could put on mute your cell phones, BlackBerrys, whatever you have, because it also interferes with our live webcast that is picked up around the world. So, we have a very wide audience watching.

As I said earlier and as Jane mentioned, Aaron David Miller is going to be moderating this session and he has been a wonderful colleague, but for two decades he served as an advisor to Republican and Democratic secretaries of state helping formulate U.S. policy on the Middle East and the Arab-Israeli peace process. He served as deputy special Middle East coordinator for Arab-Israeli negotiations, senior member of the State Department policy planning staff in the Bureau of Intelligence, and he is the author of five books on the Middle East, the most recent one, "The Much Too Promised Land: America's Elusive Search for Arab-Israeli Peace." But he has a forthcoming book which is very exciting -- I've read the manuscript -- "Can America Have Another Great President?"

Mr. Halevy, welcome to the Wilson Center. Aaron, you have control.

Aaron Miller:

Haleh, thank you very much. And Jane, thank you very much. Joe and Alma, it's a pleasure to see you. Efraim, it's an honor to be here. Let me welcome all of you, again, to the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, a living memorial to our 28th president and our only Ph.D. president. That piece of presidential esoterica is only important because I invoke the spirit of Woodrow Wilson, who believed in breaking down the barriers between the academy and government. We need Wilson more than anything else, now. Jane, I think, is committed to ensuring that that spirit stays alive and well, as Lee Hamilton had.

Effective thought before effective action, deliberate and effective thought before effective action. And we need Wilson and deliberate thinkers now more than any time that I can remember. Never have I seen a period more complex,

more potentially dangerous, and more fraught with difficulties and perhaps some opportunities during the course of the last 40 years. And if it's difficult for the United States, it's certainly difficult for the Israelis. A wise Israeli friend once said to me that the Israeli dilemma was embodied by the following notion, that during the day the Israelis fight the Arabs and win -- an Israeli speaking, now -- but during the night the Israelis fight the Nazis and lose. Now, how indicative, authoritative, representative this notion is in terms of capturing the dilemma and the conundra that Israel faces as a small power, very effective with a very big reach, is arguable. But what is not arguable is that you have a set of security challenges. Israel is not a victim and shouldn't be seen as a victim, but there's also the danger of trivializing the security challenges that it faces. No one that I know is better equipped, prepared, both by virtue of experience and temperament, than Efraim Halevy to guide us through this maze at a very important time.

And I'll just conclude, he has three things -- I wish had more of them. One is clarity, the capacity to rise above detail and gain a measure of perspective. The second is honesty, the capacity to actually assert what it is you believe. And finally, integrity to defend those views with consistency and with principle, and to alter them when in fact reality demands that they be altered. So, Efraim, I'm going to turn it over to you. Efraim will speak for about 25 minutes. I may ask a question, then we'll go to yours. I can only say one thing, this is questions -- please, not station identification. Please tell us your name and then ask your question. Efraim?

Efraim Halevy:

Thank you very much. First of all, I'd like to thank Jane Harman for her warm words. I feel a little abashed, I must admit. I would hope that many of the things she has said are as true as she thinks that -- she thinks they are. But I'll leave it for further judgment. I wish to also thank Aaron, who I've known for quite a long time and with whom we worked very, very closely on some of the key issues which have bedeviled the region over a long period of time. And I was very, very honored when he approached me and asked me whether I would come to speak to you today. And I thank you for the opportunity, and I want to thank everybody else who is involved in making this event possible.

I would like not to speak in a very ordered way, in a very regimental way. I'd like to offer a few thoughts in the next few minutes on some of the major aspects of the situation in that troubled region where Israel is destined to be for the next 2,000 years, at least. First of all, we had an event a couple of days ago which I think was not recorded here, without much attention. A Grad missile was shot from the Gaza Strip to one of our cities in the south of Israel, and it hit a children's kindergarten but thankfully it was at night and there were no children there.

I mention this because had this missile -- had it been sent in the day, and had this missile hit a kindergarten with children in it, the number of fatalities would probably have been very high. And this would have led, in my opinion, to an immediate change in the situation, not only to Israel and the Gaza Strip, but also in the entire region. It would have been a changer, not a money changer. It would have been a regional changer.

I'm saying this because we are living in a situation, here in the Middle East, where individual events can have enormous effect on a whole range of issues. And it is often in the hands of individuals to bring this about. This is the situation we are in.

I will say, by the way, in this respect, that the fact that Israel now has one means at its disposal -- a system which was developed over the years called Iron Dome, in which we are able to -- at times to detect these missiles before they reach the destination and to blow them up in thin air -- this has also been a money changer in the Middle East. If we did not have this means, if we had not developed them over the last few years, we would be at the mercy of this kind of rocket attack and we would have to resort to other means. We would have, probably, ultimately to move into the Gaza Strip and retake it. And were it not for the United States of America in developing Iron Dome and in financing key elements of this program at a very critical time, again, we would not have been in a position to conduct our daily lives the way they are being conducted today. I am saying this because one of the aspects, one of the features of the Middle East is that these individual events which cannot be foreseen can have an enormous effect on the course of history in the Middle East.

Similarly, I would like to mention an event which took place slightly over a year ago when the Israel embassy in Cairo was attacked by a mob. And at the last stages of that event, five Israeli guards were behind an iron, metal door which was the only obstacle between them and the mob. And after several hours of an event which had been unfolding, Israel did not have the capability or the capacity at that moment in time to prevail on anybody in Egypt to take action to avert what would have been a disaster, which I will mention in a moment. At that moment, the prime minister of Israel, Mr. Netanyahu, who was in the situation room in Jerusalem and who had been personally handling the crisis as prime minister, turned to the president of the United States and asked for American intervention to prevail upon the Egyptian forces, the Egyptian security forces, to take action.

And the president of the United States was faced with the situation in which he had to make a quick decision: A) whether he would try to take action to put the diminishing prestige that the United States had at the time in Egypt -- to put it to test; and whether to bring about a change or avert a disaster. And he had very little time to take a decision. And I don't think it was an easy decision because had it failed not only would it have been the result -- the result that I will mention in a moment, but also it would have had a very serious effect, in my opinion, on the overall policies and capabilities of the United States in the Middle East if they had failed in averting such a disaster.

And the president took the decision, and he instructed those who had to deal with it to make an approach to the Egyptian authorities. And the five men were saved through an operation of the Egyptian special forces and were spirited out of the embassy. Had this not happened, instead of five live persons arriving back in Israel, we would have had five body bags arriving in Israel. And, in my opinion, this would have been a critical change in the situation in the Middle East. Again, one solitary event with enormous consequences. And decisions which are taken on the spot by people who have to take decisions very quickly, and who have to weigh things very quickly, and who have to determine very quickly how to act in a given set of conditions.

Whereas in the past we had relative stability in the Middle East -- we had rulers, we had traditional rulers, we had the monarchies, we had principalities, we had dictators of one kind or another, but there was an element of stability. Today there is no such element of stability, and in most of the cases, the powers that be in countries in the Middle East are: A) to the large extent still fighting for their credibility and fighting for their capability to govern their countries. And the result of this is that the actual sovereignty of countries in the Middle East is not preserved in large tracts of the countries of which these governments supposedly are in power. So, for example, in Egypt when we speak of Sinai, you ask, "Does -- is Sinai part of Egypt?" Yes. "Does the government of Egypt have control of what is happening in Sinai?" No. I don't have to say that anymore about Syria. It's quite obvious, quite evident, that the government in Syria does not have the capability to exercise sovereignty throughout Syria. Just a week ago, a number of villages very close to the Israeli-Syrian border were overrun and taken over by the Free Syrian Army. And this presents a problem to us. It also certainly presents a problem to the Syrian authorities in Damascus.

And therefore, it's more obvious now than ever before, that central governments less and less have control over the destinies, over large tracts of the -- of their territory. I mentioned, for instance, Lebanon, where in the south you have the Hezbollah which actually controls that part of Lebanon. And the government in Beirut has limited if any authority and capability to influence events on the south. Take Iraq, which has emerged from the situation which as -- has been after the events of 2003 when Saddam Hussein was overthrown. To say that the government of Iraq has control over the country is -- would be a very large exaggeration. The Kurdish area in the north is more or less a semiautonomous area. Quite prosperous, by the way, and quite successful. But in terms of control, does it control? I think it would be a fallacy to say that the forces in Baghdad control what is happening in every parts of the country.

Even in recent weeks, take the situation in Saudi Arabia where there have been riots and uprisings in the east, where there is a large Shiite majority -- minority. There have been clashes between the forces, the security forces of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Shiites there. That

is a very sensitive area. I would like to recall where there is a lot of the oil of the kingdom which is concentrated there. And it is also very sensitive because the Shiites of course, in terms of religion, they refer to Tehran and not to Mecca. So even in a country like Saudi Arabia which enjoys relative stability, there are problems there, and rising problems. So, we have this situation which we have to deal with, which is a very difficult situation both for the governments in place and also for other governments like the government of Israel, who has to determine what to do.

And, of course, we have the situation, the Palestinian Authority, where the Authority doesn't control all of the territory which supposedly is under its governance. The Gaza Strip is under the control of the Hamas today. And even in the West Bank, the Hamas still has a very, very serious presence despite numerous efforts which have been carried out to subdue them. So as far as Palestine and the Palestinians are concerned, they are split down the middle both politically and geographically. And here, again, the authority in Ramallah does not control what is happening in the Gaza Strip. These are situations which we have to take into account when we look at the situation -- when the -- we look at the overall picture which presents -- is presented to us in the Middle East.

The third point I'd like to make is this: that we have in the region a clear upsurge of religion as a major power and a major factor in the governance of countries. Secularism in the Middle East is in decline at the moment. For a very long time, secularism was succeeding. I'd like to recall, for instance, the famous party, the Ba'ath Party, the Socialist Ba'ath Party, which was a secularist party which governed Syria and governed Iraq for quite some time. And, to a large extent, the government of Hosni Mubarak and Anwar Sadat was a secular government. It was not a government which was religiously motivated in the way it carried out its business and daily affairs.

Today, religion is a major effect in the Middle East, Islam is a major effect. And as a result of that, the divide, the historic divide between the Shiites and Sunna, the Shia and Sunna -- this is something which is a major political phenomenon which we have to deal with in the Middle East, which the Middle East has to deal with as it goes along. This is not something we had some time ago. And even in

Turkey, which is still a secularist country, nevertheless the religion as you well know has come not to dominate the scene but it's certainly had a major effect on the scene after the success of the AK in Turkey. So religion is something which has to be contended with, which has to be dealt with. And I would suggest to you this morning that I don't think we have found the ways and means of dealing with religion as a political factor in determining international relations.

We have also other aspects of the situation which we have to be very clear about. First of all, I'd like to mention the fact that Russia is returning to be a serious actor in the Middle East. For over a decade and more after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia did not play a major role, but this is beginning to change. It began to change after the events in Libya where Russia suffered a second setback from its point of view, following the setback it had in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein and the fall of Russian influence in the Middle East, as a result of these two events.

We are now witnessing the beginning of a Russian comeback in the Middle East: A) in the way that Russia is battling alongside the regime in Damascus to maintain the situation in Damascus, to maintain Assad in power. And, B) only last week, I'd like to recall or to mention to you that Russia has signed a very large arms deal with Iraq for over \$4 billion, if I'm not mistaken. And it's ironic, I'd say, that after the United States had toppled Saddam Hussein, within a few years now the Russians are beginning to come back to the Middle East, through Iraq of all places.

Russia as a Middle East power, alongside the United States, is beginning to show its mettle in one way or another, and this already catapults the Middle East back into the realm of international politics, into what was once the big divide over so many years between the Communist bloc and the Western bloc, between the United States and the Soviet Union. The end of the Cold War and all that that had with it, the fact that in Desert Storm, the first Iraqi war, Russia -- the Soviet Union, actually -- fought alongside the United States. Didn't fight, but it was part of the coalition which confronted Saddam Hussein, if you will remember that particular event in history, a very interesting event in many points of view. After that, there was a change and Russia receded into the background

for a few years, and now they're coming back. So, once again, the Middle East is beginning very slowly to become again a scene of international conflict, and this is something which cannot be ignored and cannot be denied.

And then we have Iran. If I don't mention Iran, people will say that I am derelict in my duty as an Israeli, if we don't mention Iran. So, I mention Iran, please note. And we have Iran, which is now undergoing a very difficult period in its history. It has resumed its program for attaining a military nuclear capability. It has confronted the world as a -- at large. It has confronted both the West and the East, and I'll come back to that in a moment. And the fact of the matter is that Iran is facing up to the world as a whole in defiance, notwithstanding the fact that it is now undergoing the pain of sanctions which are biting, which are effective, which have not only affected the economy at large in Iran, but also the business sector and the financial setup in Iran.

The rapid devaluation of the rial, which has been losing value of -- in the effect of tens and tens of percentages, and the official rate I think is less than half of what the practical rate is today. I said in Israel the other day that if the sheqel, which is now four sheqels to the dollar, would suddenly rise to be 10 sheqels to the dollar, there would be a run on the banks and no Israeli would leave even one sheqel in the bank. And I don't know what will happen if there would be such a massive devaluation of the American dollar, because I cannot imagine that there ever will be a devaluation of an American dollar, because I don't know to what it would devalue -- against what it would devalue. But in any effect, the situation in Iran is rapidly developing and there are problems, serious problems in Iran. Very, very serious problems.

Just last week, Khamenei, the spiritual leader and the practical leader of Iran, spoke three times in one week. He doesn't often speak in such succession. And of course he more or less discountant [sic] -- discounted the whole account of the effect of sanctions on the Middle East -- on the Iran. But it's obvious that he's speaking like that because the population at large in Iran is now feeling the brunt of what these sanctions are. And the problem is what to do about Iran, how to deal with Iran. And I mention again what I said a couple of minutes ago, that as far as Iran is concerned there is, more or less, a united,

international front against allowing Iran attain -- obtaining a nuclear capability. We say, you know, flippantly, the "five plus one" are going to meet. Who are the five plus one? Let us remind ourselves, the five -- the five members of the Security Council which include Russia and China, and the one is Germany. So it's not just that the United States doesn't want Iran to achieve a nuclear military capability. It's also Russia that doesn't want them to achieve such a capability, and it's also China that doesn't want to let them achieve the capability. How to engineer this operation, this tool, if I can put it that -- to get the Iranians to change their policy on this, I think, is a major challenge, a major challenge for international diplomacy. It's a major challenge for diplomacy of the United States.

I'd like to mention two aspects of this, two facts. The distance between Tehran and Moscow is more or less like the distance between Tehran and Jerusalem, and I don't think the Russians would like to be under the threat or potential threat of an Iranian nuclear capability. So there is room here of course for a very, very intensive and a very, very professional effort to get the Iranians off the hook and thereby get us all off the hook. How to do this is a major test for international diplomacy. How to bring it about is a major test for the capability of minds and brains here in Washington and elsewhere around the world. I think that it is doable because, in the end, the Iranians have shown on several occasions in the past when they have realized that it's in -- not in their national interest to continue with the level of confrontation which they have developed over the years against the entire world, they have found ways and means of backing down.

I'd like to mention two other aspects in conclusion, in my opening remarks. The relations between the Middle East and the entire world have gone through a lot of problems in the last couple of centuries, and the peoples of the Middle East have had various types of relationships with the powers from without. Besides their basic interests, economic and geopolitical, there have been three other interests which have been very important for peoples in the Middle East. One has been to try and to preserve their way of life. And their way of life was not the Western democratic system. It was not having parliaments who are elected the way they're elected here. I cannot imagine a presidential campaign in Egypt, the like of which is

happening here. Believe not. Many may -- maybe some of you would not think this would be even desirable, but that's a different question.

The fact of the matter is I cannot imagine such a presidential campaign in Cairo, or in Damascus, or in Riyadh, or even in Tehran. So, it's the question of culture. There's the question of culture, basic culture. And we have not found the ways and means of how to engage in a intercultural dialogue. I'd like to recall, a few years ago there were efforts by the United States to bring democracy to the Middle East -- by a Republican administration, by the way, of the previous president. And this didn't work because it does not work in that part of the world in that way. And therefore, it's not the question of how to bring democracy to the Middle East. It's how to liaise with a system which is a different system, for better or for worse.

Number two: There is a basic problem in the Middle East of the Arab nations, and not only the Arab nations, also the Iranian nation, of dignity. They feel very deeply that they do not enjoy dignity. I don't know how to describe what is dignity, I cannot give you a recipe of what are the components of dignity, but dignity is figured very high on the list of elements which are troubling countries in the Middle East. Few months ago, I happened to be in a meeting with various people including Iranians who were people from the -- from Tehran, not of the opposition. And this was a short time after the first round of talks between the five plus one, the renewed talks between five plus one, and Iran, and Istanbul. And a senior Iranian figure spent 15 minutes saying how wonderful those talks were.

They were wonderful for three reasons: A) because their dignity was respected. And B) how was it respected? It was respected because the talks were conducted around a round table, which meant to say that every person round the table was not sitting at the head of the table. They were all equal. That was dignity. You might think this is childish. You might think this is not something which is of importance. It is. And in dealing with a country like Iran, we have to deal also with their eccentricities, with their concerns, personal and otherwise, national and otherwise. And it sometimes is not all that difficult to deal with it, if you know how to deal with it. It is not

to say that you have to give up on substance. It's not -- but you can behave in a way which creates atmospheres.

And that is the third thing I want to say: atmosphere. There is in the Middle East at the moment an atmosphere of despondency. People don't believe that anything good can come of what is happening. Nothing good can come of what's happening in Syria, nothing good can happen of even which is coming in Egypt, ultimately. There are no easy solutions, there are no solutions whatsoever in reasonable distance from today. How do you feel -- feed 80 million mouths in Egypt? Nobody really knows how to do it. How do feed 80 million mouths in Tehran? Nobody really knows how to do it. And very often, when you don't know how to do things, you prefer not to deal with them, and hope that they will go away or something will happen to remove them.

I will stop here, because I didn't want this morning just to begin with the nitty-gritty of Problem A, Problem B, Problem C. I thought it was essential to put things in perspective. One of the things we have lacked in recent years is perspective. We have dealt with problems as they came along, as the nitty-gritty came along. Solved a little problem, gone further. But we have to, I think -- we have to higher the level of our -- of the way we look at things because we're going to have to live with this situation for quite some time to come. And that is my last observation. I don't think we're in the business of finding quick solutions or basic solutions to most of the problems in the Middle East in the immediate future. Thank you.

[applause]

Aaron Miller:

Efraim, thank you very much. That -- there was a lot of thematic altitude there and I, for one, really appreciate it. I'll take advantage, since I'm speaking, of asking the first question. I have only one question for you. Do you believe that Iran, with a nuclear capacity, constitutes an existential threat to the State of Israel?

Efraim Halevy:

First of all, I will say no. I don't think that there is an existential threat to Israel. I don't think that the threat of Israel -- I don't think the existence of Israel is at stake. I don't think there is any power in the

world, any capability in the world, which should bring about the demise of the State of Israel. I say this because: A) I fervently believe in this and I think there's also a matter of belief, and not only of counting soldiers and counting bombs. But I also think -- I recall how Israel was established, how it came into being. I was there.

I was a young boy at the time. I arrived in what was then Palestine in April 1948. I was there during the War of Independence, and I can tell you that the odds of Israel emerging from the War of Independence were considered less than 50/50. And the secretary of state of the United States of America at the time, General George Marshall, who was the -- had been a celebrated commander of World War II, thought that the Jews, the 600,000 Jews in the -- Palestine at the time had no chance in a war.

And yes, we paid a very, very bitter price during that war. There were days in which we lost hundreds of people in that battlefield. We lost 6,000 dead there, 1 percent of the population which is a very, very large number of people for 600,000 people, and we emerged from that. And I don't think that the State of Israel will cease to exist, at least, as I said at the outset -- and I didn't mean this as a joke -- for the next 10,000 years, and after that we can come and discuss it again.

So how can we survive a nuclear capacity of Iran? First of all, we should do everything in our power that this should not come about, of course. But I don't accept the premise that if tomorrow morning the Iranians announce that they have a nuclear capacity, you begin the countdown to the end of Israel. Because that's the essence of the statement that there is an existential threat. And I say it in very clear, practical terms. If you say there is an existential threat, means to say that if tomorrow morning the Iranians have a nuclear capability, you begin the countdown to the end of the state of Israel. And this will never be the case. Never.

So how do we protect Israel in that eventuality? I will not go into the details, but I will say that Israel has numerous capacities to deal with such a situation, military, strategic, and otherwise. And I don't think that the Iranians will be able to do what they want to do. And we will take the necessary steps to see to it that they are

not able to do it. I think there is a fallacy in using the sense of the -- an existential threat to Israel because it means to say that the Iranians have it in their capacity to destroy Israel if they have a nuclear capability. In other words, we as Israelis or we as the world are telling the Iranians, "If you get the bomb, you will have the capacity to destroy Israel. You will have -- you will be in reach of your aim to destroy Israel." And I think it is wrong for a -- two warring sides to have one side telling the other side, "You know, there could be a situation in which you can actually kill me." That's not the way to run a war, and not a way to run a strategic program at all.

So you will say to me that some of what I said lacks in specifics. Yes, but I cannot go into specifics this morning because if I did this I wouldn't be able to go back to Israel.

[laughter]

But I can assure you that we have been in very, very dire straits and situations many, many times in our history, and we will overcome. Would I like us to be in such a situation? No. I would much prefer this not to happen, but I also would like to try and convince the Iranians that from their point of view, the situation of their getting a nuclear capacity is a threat to them. And this necessitates two things, Aaron. A) it means to say that we must craft a strategy to do this. And secondly, we have to talk to them. We have to dialogue with them, and I am a great believer in dialogue, talking to people.

I would never have been married had I not spoke to my future spouse and convinced her that she would take me seriously. You have to dialogue, you have to talk to people. You have to -- you have to speak to their minds, speak to their thoughts, speak to their feelings and so forth, and not just hammer them on the head. You should hammer them on the head as well. The same time, with one hand use the hammer, and the other hand -- and the other hand, use it in the event that you can outstretch the hand.

Aaron Miller:

Thank you, Efraim. Jane?

Jane Harman:

Do I need a microphone? No.

Aaron Miller:
Yeah, here.

Jane Harman:

Efraim, that was a -- it's all fascinating. Your three points about learning to liaise with a different system, understanding dignity, and changing the atmosphere are, I think, crucially important. My question is: How important is it, in order to achieve these things, to put a Muslim face on whatever response we now have to Iran and to Syria, to be part of a group led by either a regional organization or a country like Turkey that has, one would hope, cultural and instinctive understandings of some of these things?

Efraim Halevy:

I don't think, necessarily, we have to have a Muslim face. I think it is important to impress upon the other side that just as they need to survive in this world, economically and otherwise, they have to talk to us as well. They have to recognize us, as well. I don't think we need to sort of speak to them as if we are Muslims, or to use a Muslim to talk to them. No. On the contrary, maybe not. But I do think there have to be Muslims on our side of the divide who are part of the party, yes. And I think Turkey is very, very important.

I think everything should be done to bring Turkey on board, and I think this is also doable. It means to say that we also have to preserve our dignity but also use a bit of intelligence here and there. Not intelligence in terms of the craft I was dealing with, but intelligence of the mind, how to deal with individuals. I mean, you have a vast capacity in this country to deal with people. You do it in the business world, you do it in other worlds, you do it in the scientific world. It's all a question of dialogue, of talking to people, of trying to bring them around. And I think it's doable.

Yes, it's doable and we've done it in the past. We signed a peace treaty with Egypt, we signed a peace treaty with Jordan. We had an agreement with the Palestinians, and we did it through talking to them. We didn't do it otherwise. We talked to them secretly, and then we talked to them semi-secretly and so forth, and I think this is the way to do things. And I think ultimately, despite the tendency of people to say that in the Muslim world you have these sort

of strands of suicidal tendencies, no. Basically, they are not suicidal. The Iranians are not suicidal. Although they sent their children into the battlefields during the Iraqi-Irani war, they are not suicidal. By the way, they sent the children into the war. They didn't, themselves, go to the battlefield.

Aaron Miller:

Efraim, I have a question from -- we have over 60 people in other rooms who are watching you. This one comes from Yasmin Hani [spelled phonetically] from Egypt, who wants to know: How does the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt affect security cooperation and Israeli security interests generally?

Efraim Halevy:

First of all, we have a peace treaty with Egypt and the Egyptians are adhering to the treaty in very strict terms. There are areas in which there is daily contact between Israelis and Egyptians to deal with the security problems in the Sinai. And I think that President Morsi has made it very clear that Egypt will abide by its international obligations. I think we have to accept the fact that Egypt has the right to decide on its own system of government, and it has the right -- the citizens of Egypt have the right to choose their government, and that's what they did.

And, indeed, after President Morsi was elected, within less than a few hours the prime minister of Israel, Netanyahu, sent him a message of congratulation and urged him to work alongside, together, on issues of common concern. And I think this was the right thing to do. He didn't say, "Because it's a Muslim Brotherhood, I will not do this." I think it was the right thing to do, and I think he -- in this way he, A) took the initiative and, B) I think he also set the tone for what might happen in the future. I think that Morsi needs to be encouraged along this way.

And when I say encouraged, the way -- there are two ways of encouraging. First of all, there is way of inducing people using inducements. And also, it is also a method of -- has to use the method of saying what the penalty might be if it went the wrong way. That's the way relations are conducted. I have no reason to believe at the moment that Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood is intent on entering into a confrontation with Israel at the moment. I think that's the last thing that they should be interested in. They

have problems today in Egypt which are gigantic. Social, economic, and others. And I don't sense there is any great appetite on the part of the Egyptian population to go to war with Israel. I don't think this is true, and I don't think it'll be true for a long time to come.

But we shouldn't rest on our laurels. I think we should do things and take initiatives in order to develop a relationship with Egyptians. By the way, I will say that the Muslim Brotherhood is a movement which is not restricted to Egypt. There are Muslim Brotherhood branches throughout the Middle East and Arab countries. And one of the branches of the Muslim Brotherhood happens to be presently ruling part of Palestine, which is Gaza. And I have said over the recent years, and this is not a secret, that I think we should find ways and means of dialoguing with the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza. And it has not been a very popular view, but once we are dialoguing with the Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo, I don't see why we are inhibited from talking to the sister organization in other parts of the world.

Aaron Miller:

Yes, could you identify yourself, please?

Mohammad Razani:

Yes. [inaudible]

Haleh Esfandiari:

There is a mic coming.

Aaron Miller:

Actually, yes.

Mohammed Razani:

I will raise my voice.

Aaron Miller:

One sec, the mic is coming.

Mohammad Razani:

Mohammed Razani [spelled phonetically] from the Arab League. Regarding stability, I had the impression that because of the changes that took place in the Middle East, and no more -- or much less secular states now, this maybe -- Israel is not happy with it. She would rather have the status quo. Now with the Arab Spring and maybe more other

Arab -- more other countries will experience Arab Spring, we don't know which ones, this will be -- the time will not be in the benefit for Israel. Because those leaders now which are new, whether they are Muslims or not, or brother Muslim -- Muslim Brotherhood or not, they are accountable much more than the leaders before, who are dictators, as you said, to the issue of the Palestinian and to the public opinion. And this maybe, the time, is not in the benefit for -- the benefit for Israel in the long or short term. Is it not the time now, about time, to put the peace plan of -- the Arab peace plan on the table as the time is -- I think is the right time now, do you think? Thank you.

Efraim Halevy:

Well, first of all, I have not -- never thought that we should be happy or unhappy with what's happening in the Arab world. Our capacity to influence what is happening in the Arab world is very limited, to say the least. And therefore, I think we should accept the facts as they are. And whether it's good or bad for us, what has happened in the Arab Spring, is immaterial as far as I'm concerned. We have to deal with the situation as it is and not on the one hand to bewail the fact that in the past things were different than they are today, or in the future they might be better than they are now. This is the way it is at the moment.

I think that there has to be a mutual movement, here, between us and the countries surrounding us. The days in which there was a united Arab front against Israel have gone. And each country in the Arab world has its own interests at heart. This began with the Israeli-Egyptian treaty in 1978. It continued with the Palestinian agreement we had. It continued with the peace with Jordan. There have been constant rounds of negotiations between us and the Syrians. Just last week -- or this week, I think it was -- there was a revelation that in a year or two ago, the United States was brokering a kind of an effort to bring about a new initiative to settle the problems between Israel and Syria. And this was confirmed in Washington. So we should be always on the alert to try and get these things done.

I think, yes, that the Palestinian problem needs to be attended. The problem is, sir, that whether Israel policy is or not good concerning the Palestinians, the Palestinian world is split at the moment. It's split geographically,

and it's split politically. Those who are ruling the West Bank are not the people who are ruling Gaza. And those who rule Gaza are not in the West Bank. It's not within Israel's capacity, or it's not our task, to try and bring about unification between the two. And I don't think we should be involved in that, but we have a problem as a result of this and we will have to deal with the problem as it is. I don't think -- my view is that Mahmoud Abbas, with all the respect we have for him, does not have the mandate to sign off for the entire Palestinian people today.

I'd like to say that it's six years since there have been elections for the Palestinian parliament. And in the last elections to the Palestinian parliament in 2006, the Hamas got a majority. By the way, I'd like to mention, the fact that the Hamas participated in the election in 2006 was against the wishes of Israel and against the wishes of the Palestinian Authority. And the power that forced both Israel and the Palestinians to allow the Hamas to participate in the elections was here in Washington. It was a diktat of the United States of America that the Hamas should participate in the election, notwithstanding the fact that the Hamas did not renounce violence in 2006 which was considered to be a condition for going to be part of a political process. And this was done under the Republican administration of George W. Bush. So the fact is that there is no, unfortunately at the moment, legitimate representation of the Palestinians which can deal with the situation. And this is something which has to be corrected, in my view, and can be corrected.

Now, whether we should do it on the basis of the Arab Initiative -- I'm aware of the Arab Initiative. It has various aspects to it. I would like to draw your attention to the fact that in the roadmap for the resolution of the problem of the Middle East, which was promoted by the United States and then adopted by both Israel and the Palestinians in the year 2003, and subsequently was reaffirmed in 2004, in that roadmap there is a preamble which says what are the basis for a resolution of the problems. And one of the elements mentioned there is the Arab Peace Initiative. It's mentioned specifically as one of the elements which is the basis for reaching an agreement. So, I say yes, that could be parts of the elements of the agreement, but not the only element. It cannot be the only basis for this.

But what it needs to be is a genuine effort on both sides to reach a solution. Solutions usually mean compromise. And ultimately, Israel will have to compromise and the Palestinians will have to compromise in order to live together, side by side. But I mention again, I don't think that at the moment there is a practical possibility here. Because the question will be, "Who represents the Palestinians, and who can actually implement the agreement once an agreement is made?" And I don't see the capability of implementation on the side of the Palestinians at the moment.

Aaron Miller:

There's another question, Efraim, from the overflow room. You've had an enormous experience in dealing with Jordan. In the monarchies, the Moroccans, the Saudis, and the Jordanians so far have fared much better in the face of the Arab Spring than the so-called faux republics or presidencies. Do you -- are you concerned about the future of Jordan?

Efraim Halevy:

I think -- first of all, I think the -- personally, the monarchical system of government is a very good system. And in Biblical times we had a monarchical system in the Jewish people, and I sometimes wonder looking at the Israeli politics if we wouldn't have a good idea to bring back a king or something to rule us. We would be in better shape, maybe, than we are at the moment. But that is, of course, an aside.

[laughter]

I'm not propagating it at the moment. What I'd like to say is this: I think Jordan is going through a difficult time. I think the king is handling this situation very, very capably. I'd like to mention that traditionally the king of Jordan has always, both himself and his late father who I knew and with whom I had a long-lasting relationship over several years on behalf of several Israeli prime ministers, was always jockeying a position in the position. Jordan is now under extreme pressure from the north, as well. The overflow of refugees into Jordan has been a problem. After the Desert Storm, there was a big flow of refugees from the Gulf states into Jordan. Then after the Iraqi second conflagration or the second war, there was a big flow from

Iraq into Jordan. Now there's been a flow of Syrian refugees into Jordan.

Jordan is not such a big country that it can service such a large influx of refugees. So that is also a complicating issue. And on top of all that, as you probably will recall, on several occasions there have been large groups of Palestinians who have moved into Jordan as a result of both the War of Independence and then the War of '67. So Jordan, having all this on its shoulders that -- one has to compliment the leaders in Jordan over a long period of time of handling the situation so capably. And I think that given the resilience of the regime at the moment, I think that there is a good chance that the regime will overcome the current problems. And certainly, Israel values the relationship with Jordan immensely.

The largest -- the longest border Israel has with an Arab state is with Jordan. And in many years gone by, this was a border which was the source of constant terrorist activity which was conducted across the border into Israel. This has now stopped and it is the most peaceful border we have today, and we hope it stays there. I say the most peaceful border, although we have one more line which is also a line which has been relatively peaceful, and that is the disengagement line between us and Syria, which has lasted since 1974 today, is 38 years? So 38 years of a line which is -- where we have preserved a relative peace, I think is a big achievement for both sides.

Aaron Miller:
Yes?

Julie Rishadi:
Thank you. Hi, my name is Julie Rishadi [spelled phonetically]. I'm here with Human Events. Thanks for your time today, sir. I'm wondering what you make of the fact that the main suspect in last year's Iranian plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States pled guilty in a U.S. court yesterday. What does this maybe say about, you know, what the Iranian government is willing to do?

Efraim Halevy:
Well, it didn't need this particular case in order to prove once again that the Iranians have been involved in terrorist activities of -- against persons, and against

states, and against countries for a long period of time. Iran uses terrorism as a major tool of its international relationships. It's as simple as all that. And Iran has plotted against others as well, individuals as well, and also has been shipping arms and equipment into areas inside the Middle East. Syria is one case now in point. There is an Iranian force, there are Iranian forces battling on Syrian -- on soil against Syrians. There are Iranians who have been in Lebanon for quite some time and who have been handling equipment in Lebanon, which has been of a great danger to Israel. Iran has used the State of Sudan as a -- as a -- an area through which they could send equipment through Sudan, to Egypt, to Sinai, into the Gaza Strip. As I said, the case itself is a case. It shows the audacity of certain Iranians. It also shows, I think, that the Iranians, in addition to talking to them, must be told in no uncertain terms by actions taken, like the actions of the U.S. government, that there are certain types of conduct that will never be tolerated.

Aaron Miller:

Diane Flag [spelled phonetically] from the Middle East Institute wants to know what your assessment is of Prime Minister Netanyahu's public announcement for desire for "red lines" with respect to Iran.

Efraim Halevy:

I was hoping that I would not be asked that question, actually.

[laughter]

I must admit that I understand the desire of the prime minister to draw a line, both substantively and also figuratively. I think his appearance in the United Nations General Assembly was a very successful appearance in terms of the quality of his delivery and also, I'd say, the convincing arguments he made. Generally speaking, we have a very bad experience with red lines. Israel has drawn red lines almost any issue you can imagine over the years. We have drawn red lines on our relations with the Palestinians, we have drawn red lines on our relations with other countries. And then, afterwards, we have sometimes had a problem of reconciling our decisions with the red lines that we have placed.

So, I think the use of a red line creates clarity on the one hand, but also it creates a commitment that not always can be met. And therefore, I personally have felt that the use of a red line is not conducive to the ultimate aim. Because, as I said previously in the opening remarks, I don't think that we will benefit from bringing Iran publicly to its knees. I think we need to find a way in which we can obtain the desired results and enable them also to feel that they have, in certain areas -- they have gained something beyond just the simple removal of sanctions.

I don't think that ultimately drawing the red line will convince the Iranians. I think what will convince the Iranians is a mixture of, as I said, use of practical means in order to make it clear to them beyond any doubt whatsoever that the world will not accept a nuclear military capability. That's number one. And on the other hand, that the world is willing to address some of the concerns of Iran in one way or another.

Iran is going to have a difficult problem. I don't commiserate with the Iranians, don't misunderstand me. I'm not here to plead their cause in any way, whatsoever. There are two things -- there are two things, not one thing, that Iranians will have to come to terms with. They will have to come to terms with, A) the absence of nuclear military capability. And, B) they will have to come to terms with the existence of the state of Israel. Their refusal to accept the right of a sovereign state, a member of the United Nations, as a viable state, as a state which is legitimate, is unacceptable from any point of view, from any aspect and any angle whatsoever. We cannot accept that the Iranians will be allowed to delegitimize another state, whichever it is, and certainly from our point of view, not Israel. So, ultimately the Iranians will have to swallow two bitter pills, not one. One pill will be the pill of the nuclear threat, and the other will be the pill of accepting Israel's right to exist.

Now, despite all the rhetoric which we are listening from -- we are hearing from Tehran, I believe that many Iranians in places of power understand that Israel is here to stay. They realize that Israel is not going to disappear, as it will not disappear. And therefore, they will have to come to terms with this reality. And these two elements means to say that in order to achieve the aim, you have to find

ways of giving them -- what did I say, a few minutes ago -- to resort to issues of dignity. It's a difficult thing to do. It's very difficult. I'm not saying it's going to be easy, but I think this is something we have to do because we have to look at these things positively. We have to find a positive way of dealing with the situation that way it is. And I had a teacher very many years ago who always used to say to me, "Think positively." And I didn't always understand what he meant. And I'm beginning to understand in my latter years what this is all about.

Aaron Miller:

I think we have time for one more question. Sorry. Yes?

Female Speaker:

[inaudible]

Aaron Miller:

Actually, wait for the mic. You're the last questioner.

Female Speaker:

Thank you. Hi, my name is Whitney and I'm with Fox News, and I was just wondering -- in your assessment, what is the current relationship between the administration and the Israeli government? And do you think Israel could militarily strike Iran's nuclear programs? And would there be support for a unilateral action?

Aaron Miller:

The threefer [unintelligible].

[laughter]

Female Speaker:

Sorry. Trying to make the most out of my last --

Aaron Miller:

Yes, that's true.

Efraim Halevy:

Well, I was afraid you were going to ask me for a list of targets, and that I would have problem. I think that the relationship between the administration and Israel has been a very good one, and I say this despite the various bumps along the road. We never had perfect relations between Israel and the United States, that I can tell you. We had times when we were faced with very, very severe actions

taken against us by American administrations. In 1956, the Russia and the America teamed up to issue a joint ultimatum to Egypt -- to Israel, to withdraw from the Sinai Campaign. This was the height of the Cold War. Maybe it was an Israeli achievement that we brought Khrushchev and Bulganin together with Eisenhower, maybe.

[laughter]

But nevertheless it was a painful experience. And I don't want to cite other cases now at this particular point, because I don't want to ruffle feelings around this table on the eve of an American election. But the fact of the matter is we have had all kinds of relationships, and I judge this by the facts. And I think that in the last four years, we have had a relationship with the United States on the practical issues which are important to Israel, the like of which we have never had almost with almost any other administration. I say "almost," and I don't want to compare this or that and the other, in order not to get into too much more trouble than I have already this morning. Okay?

Now, you have asked me about a strike. Okay? I am on record as saying that I think a strike not only should be the last resort, but we should realize what is the -- what would be the possible results of a strike. There is also a morning after, not only in terms of how long -- how far this strike will achieve the desired aim. Let's imagine for argument's purposes that we will strike and we will obliterate the entire Iranian capability. Okay? What does this mean the morning before -- the morning after? That suddenly the sun will shine, and everybody will be happy, and the Iranians will say, "Well, we got the message now. Now we're going to go and sit in peace, and drink Iranian tea together"? No, I don't think so.

So I believe a strike is the last resort. Now, the greatest achievement in any war -- as an ancient Chinese strategist, Sun Tzu, said -- is a war which is one which is won without firing one shot. And I think our aim should be to win the war without firing a shot. How to do it? Sanctions, more sanctions, more sanctions, and many other things. The fact of the matter is -- the fact of the matter is, the sanctions have not brought the end to the program. The sanctions are hurting very much. And the fact of the matter is that many of the people who say that

sanctions will not succeed are also those who are stridently demanding that there be more, and more, and more sanctions. And there is a contradiction in this because if you don't believe that sanctions are going to be successful, why press for more sanctions? So I believe that sanctions are effective. Not effective enough, yet. So, there has to be a combination, as I said, a combination of two things.

Now, I don't believe ultimately that, whatever is going to happen in the end, it will be a clear-cut decision which will emerge. It will be a blurred situation for a little while, just as after the Cuban Missile Crisis. And I've been reading about this in recent weeks. The exact contours of what actually was agreed in the -- to resolve the crisis only emerged after some time. Key elements of this story have even just begin to emerge in our 30, 40 years. And I would settle for all kinds of arrangements in which the ultimate denouement, the ultimate solution, was a solution which was reached. And, yes, we haven't benefited from the fact that apparently the Iranians no longer are pursuing it. But what exactly do the Iranians get? What exactly happens, will emerge after some time. There are ways of doing this. If you did it with the Cuban Missile Crisis, maybe you could do it here, as well. I'm not saying that you can, I'm saying it should be tried. I think there are many things which have not been tried yet. That is my contention. I believe in the months to come, this has to be tried and has to be tried with an immense, immense investment of good will of trying getting -- trying getting the solution. I think it has to be done, and it has to be done by people who are solution orientated and not war orientated.

Aaron Miller:

Efraim, thank you. Please join me in thanking Efraim for a wonderful presentation.

[applause]

[end of transcript]